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ABSTRACT

In schooling, a learning community is founded on its members, consisting of teachers, children, parents and people who care. As the person with the professional responsibility for building and sustaining a learning community, the teacher is challenged to attend closely to three key areas: classroom environment, curriculum, and social relationships. A learning community possesses the following characteristics: children work together; children and teachers work together; children and teachers attend to each other; parents are involved in their children's learning; and children are seen as capable learners. Classroom communities can be created through the physical setting, reward systems, communication with parents, displays, community celebrations, and routines. Teachers can become co-learners and collaborators through learning groups and quality listening. Creating an ideal learning environment in the early years of schooling means creating a classroom learning community. (PM)

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Developing learning communities in the first years of school

LESLEY STUDANS

In schooling, a learning community is founded on its members — teachers, children, parents and carers. As the person with the professional responsibility for building and sustaining a learning community, the teacher is challenged to attend closely to three key areas: classroom environment, curriculum and social relationships.

PART 1 About learning communities

Beyond the buzzword

Schools are communities. Each school is a group of adults and children with a common purpose: learning. Within their guiding statements, most schools and teachers express the aim of creating a 'community of learners'. So what are learning communities?

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Features of a learning community

Children work together.

Desks and spaces are organised to allow learners to talk and work together. Children also produce work together, not just individually. Collaborative work is highly valued by the teacher and children. Teachers think carefully when grouping children. A community spirit is fostered using classroom meetings and democratic processes. Social skills are highlighted. Respect for others is encouraged.

Children and teachers work together.

Teachers learn *with* and *from* the children. It is less likely that there will be a fixed blackboard/whiteboard at the front of the room; more likely there will be portable whiteboards, taskboards, learning centres. Work projects may be negotiated, with a balance struck between child direction and teacher direction.

Children and teachers attend to each other.

Children's learning is continually observed, and these observations directly inform the teacher's guidance of the learning. Observations go beyond conventional checklists to include the *processes* of learning. Photographs and transcripts of discussions may be used. The teacher makes her/his observations open to the children and their parents, who are invited to comment. Children are encouraged to listen to each other; this can be seen in the respect they show for each other's opinions and work.

Parents are involved in their children's learning.

Parents/Carers are able to participate in their children's learning, not only as 'reading mothers' but through class meetings about their children's learning, many opportunities to visit the classroom and regular information about what is happening in the classroom.

Children are seen as capable learners.

Underlying all of the elements above is a respect for the learning capabilities of children, even very young children.

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Parents belong in the classroom community. These parents have come to school to celebrate their children's learning.

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Why create learning communities?

Creating classrooms where everyone works together is hard work. Some aspects of school culture work against co-operative endeavour. Competitive educational systems are seen to prepare children for the end of their compulsory schooling where, in Australia, they will have to do well in a finishing exam. This is a narrow view of the purpose of education. If we are educating children for life, co-operative skills must come to the fore. Such skills are essential for family and working life, and for building communities beyond the school.

The discredited, but still entrenched, idea that works against the formation of learning communities is the notion of a child as a person who needs to be filled with knowledge and attitudes by the teacher. This 'empty vessel' image of childhood possibly remains satisfying for many teachers because it means that our purpose is to save children from ignorance. Since children's role in their learning is seen to be minimal, it is up to us to *create* the learning. It also means that we do not need to share the power in our classroom with the children. As a result, teacher talk dominates, children are not included in decisions about their learning, and more passive learning techniques (such as rote learning and worksheets) are employed. Where the teacher is the knowledge imparter, it is not especially important for the children to work together or learn from each other. Co-operative learning can be viewed as an optional extra, or ignored all together.

Of course, this view of childhood, originating from Locke's philosophy in the eighteenth century, has little empirical support. Educational research from Piaget onwards shows children as active learners. Recent research shows that the greatest amount of brain development occurs in the first three years of life. This development is an interaction between brain maturation and the physical and social environments. The concept of being 'ready to learn' (for example, at 'school' age) is evidently simplistic. Children can and do begin to learn concepts of literacy from a very early age.

What, then, is the best role for the teacher? Surely we should not leave children to learn by themselves? The answer to this comes from Vygotsky's (1934) theory of learning. He argues that children learn in a social context. They learn from everyone in their environment, child or adult. Children or adults construct knowledge together and internalise it individually. It follows, then, that children are able to do and know more with help from a competent adult or peer than they can do or know by themselves.

Thus, the teacher's role is to guide students' progress by supporting them to attain knowledge and skills that are within their grasp — to create classroom environments where students can learn from each other, and to know where children are 'at' so that the support or scaffolding provided is appropriate.

Jasmine's books

Jasmine is 20 months old. Jasmine likes books. She likes to be read to. She also likes to 'read'. She picks up a book and takes it to a quiet place (at her grandma's house, this is usually between the kitchen cupboards). Jasmine carefully turns the pages, managing paper books as competently as board books. If you try to read her the book in these circumstances, she pushes you away but, generously, allows you to watch. She uses her index finger to point to words and pictures while using a distinctive sing-song intonation and babble to 'read out' the words. Jasmine already understands that spoken language and written language are different, and that language can come from books.

Jasmine shows a corresponding visual sophistication. She is able to pick her favourite book from the bookshelf at her aunt's house, even when the spine is turned sideways. She remembers what this book looks like, even though she may visit her aunt only once a fortnight.

Of course Jasmine has not gained this knowledge by herself. She sees that reading is a significant and pleasurable activity for her family members, and imitates their reading voices. Without realising it, her family has set up a learning environment that has allowed Jasmine to acquire a range of literacy skills.

Teacher scaffolding for a child

Here is a very familiar exchange from beginning reading. The teacher elicits from the child the strategy he is using to read the word. The teacher suggests another strategy, which the child is able to use successfully. The teacher then names the strategy to help the child learn it.

Alfred: What's this word?
Teacher: What do you think it says?
Alfred: (*Looks at the picture*) Popcorn?
Teacher: Do you know what popcorn begins with?
Alfred: 'p'.
Teacher: What does this word begin with?
Alfred: 'e' ... I know, it's 'egg'.
Teacher: You found out the word by thinking of the beginning sound. Fantastic!

Children scaffolding children

Rhada and Lila are sitting next to each other, each writing their own letter to the teacher.

Rhada: How do you write 'Mrs Stewart'?
Lila: (*Very excited*) Remember, we can look on the wall and find her name.

Lila and Rhada go to the word wall together and find the name by looking at the pictures.

Lila has shown Rhada that she can find how to write words independently by using the strategy of locating print in the environment.

If Vygotsky provides the theoretical basis for the *teacher's* role, a clear conception of the *child* as a competent learner has been provided by Loris Malaguzzi and the educators from the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia in Italy. Their work originated from a community's reaction to the end of the Second World War. Their extended investigations of learning — teachers' learning along with that of the children, the subtleties of scaffolding, the care taken to set up learning environments and, above all, the reflection of this learning in their documentation — have shown the way towards creating learning communities of the highest order*.

*See the texts published by Reggio Children in the 'References and sources'.

Another perspective on the development of learning communities is provided by co-operative learning theorists such as Kagan, and Johnson and Johnson. Arising from their work are language, techniques (such as the TRIBES process) and activities that can be used when developing class communities. Lilian Katz's emphasis on project work provides another approach to consider when community-building.

PART 2 Ideas for creating classroom communities

There are many ways to create a classroom learning community. While the ideas in this *PEN* are inspired by the work of the educators from Reggio Emilia, they are not the only ways. Any approach should be appropriate to the contexts of: the children in your class (and their families); your school; your local community; and education in Australia more broadly.

A culture of community

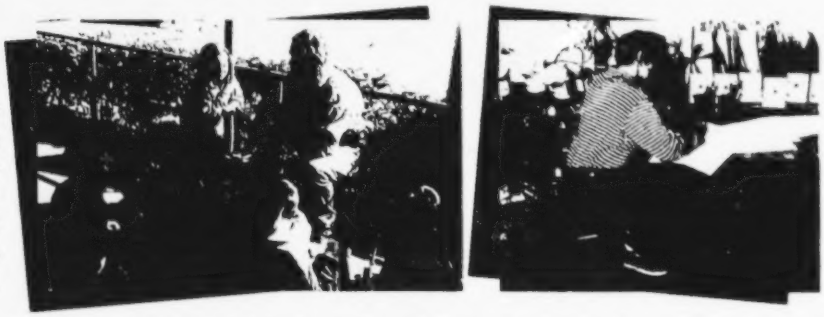
The essential prerequisite for forming an effective learning community is an image of the child as a capable learner and of the teacher as a co-learner and facilitator of learning. This attitude needs to permeate all facets of the classroom.

Ideas for community-building

The physical setting

Space for the whole class to sit in a meeting
Materials accessible to all
Desks in groups
Teacher's desk and chair at the side (rather than the front) of the classroom
Furniture and desks arranged together by teacher and children
A place for each child to call her/his own (e.g. bookbox, letterbox, tray, bag hook)
Aesthetically pleasing surroundings — beautiful furniture, cushions, fabric, plants, natural objects — including contributions from the children

Reward systems	Non-competitive, directed to attainment of group goals, or intrinsic (e.g. sense of satisfaction, pleasure, achievement) Class help enlisted for children with challenging behaviour, ensuring that such children don't become the class scapegoats
Communication with parents	Class newsletter giving detailed information about children's learning Regular meetings enabling parents to find out what is happening and to plan their children's learning Celebrations of the children's learning with parents Take-home bag with book and disposable camera enabling children to record an aspect of their home life to share with the class (e.g. a fluffy toy that visits each child's house for the night, a book of recipes, parents' memories of their first days of school) Consideration of an open-door policy Training and guidance for parent helpers, valuing of parent contributions, active solicitation of parent reflections on their helping session



These parents are acting as expert contributors: teaching children about furniture-building as part of an investigation into tables, responding in writing to a display of class learning.

Displays	Aesthetically pleasing Highlighting what develops your class community (e.g. demonstrating co-operative rather than individual achievement) Pictures of class members to de-institutionalise the classroom and signal the importance of the people in the community (e.g. photos in perspex frames) Photos on magnets on the whiteboard (for young children); these photos can double as a way of depicting groups on a taskboard Displays that highlight the children's thinking and the teacher's reflection on this — the processes of children's learning, not just end products
Social skills	Highlighted with each lesson, not taught in isolation without being practised Constant self-reflection on the quality of children's contributions to their groups
Communication system	Mechanisms such as letterboxes for the children to write to each other and to the teacher; time each day to do so
Talk	Teacher talk kept to a minimum Real questions asked — questions for which the teacher does not already have the answer: 'How did you know that?'; 'What were you thinking?'
Democratic processes	Regular class meetings Genuine choices in learning activities Children involved in reflection on how fair their classroom is Everyone included Children of different sexes and backgrounds given the opportunity to know each other by working together A variety of grouping strategies Awareness of power struggles and exclusion (e.g. an overemphasis on friendship groups can create problems)

Community celebrations	Regular Planned with the children Involving parents Using rituals that are unique to your class (e.g. a jointly devised and constructed class symbol such as a coat of arms)
Routines	Children's involvement and responsibility enlisted Use of music and visual cues, chosen with the children, to minimise teacher talk

Children involved in running classroom routines. These children are changing the reading-group task board: one is reading the tasks; the others are positioning task cards.

The teacher as co-learner and collaborator

Being a genuine co-learner and collaborator with children is not an easy thing to achieve. As a teacher, you are a leader, but one that walks with the children. You have expert knowledge of concepts and processes that your children need to attain, but you must also become an expert on the children themselves — on what they know and are ready to learn. This represents something more than a once-a-term assessment or a checklist with outcomes and indicators to be ticked.

In the following example, the teacher has gained prior knowledge of the child's progress from a published test, and has observed that the child has moved on. She records her observations by writing down Charbel's words and actions, then adding some further reflection. This provides a signpost indicating a direction in which to move with Charbel.

Charbel's chain

This story comes from the first term of the first year of primary school, where patterning is a big part of the Maths curriculum. The teacher is aware of the requirements of the Kindergarten curriculum and takes advantage of Charbel's engagement with the materials to deepen his understandings.

In the morning session, a table had been set up with materials that encourage pattern-making and sorting. Charbel came to the pattern-making table and began joining the links of a set of plastic chains in a blue and yellow pattern. 'It's Parramatta Eels [the local football team] pattern!', he said, as he brought it over to show me. I was impressed with his pattern because it had two links of yellow joined with one link of blue, which was a development on his previous pattern-making attempts. I kept encouraging him to continue the pattern. He kept on adding to it, bringing it back to me and showing it to me. 'Look how long!'

With the teacher's interaction, Charbel was able to sustain chain-making far longer than he would have by himself. Making patterns became more motivating than it had been previously. Moreover, Charbel was able to make something personally significant to him — a long symbol of his football team.

Charbel was now noticing the attribute of length, so the teacher then engineered a comparison of the length of Charbel's chain with a playdough snake being made by Bernadette at another table in the classroom.

Finally we decided to compare the chain length with the playdough. Bernadette lent her knowledge that to compare length, the chain had to be laid where the playdough began and had to bend where the playdough bent. There was great anticipation and surprise when we found that Charbel's chain was shorter than the playdough.

The teacher then encouraged Charbel to make his chain longer than the playdough snake. During this process, Charbel had to compare length many times, which he was able to do independently. On subsequent days, Charbel and Bernadette explored further problems which arose out of the comparison of the chain with the playdough.

Experienced teachers often speak of their hunches about what children are learning and achieving. Their depth of understanding is built on close *observation*. However, teachers often do not have the time to *reflect* on their observations. It was Charbel's teacher's reflection on her observations that gave her the confidence to act on her hunches and extend his learning with a challenge that was both achievable and immediately relevant to him.*

* *The PETA book 'Play and Literacy in Children's Worlds' (Beecher & Arthur, 2001) provides further guidance and suggestions for teachers seeking to build students' learning by following their interests.*

Learning groups

Care needs to be taken when forming groups. While children can learn from each other in ability groups, rich learning occurs when children contribute ideas and skills that complement each other.

Making books together

The children in this story have been making books that are highly influenced by an author study of Eric Carle. Each of these girls has different knowledge and skills to contribute. Samantha has an understanding of Eric Carle's style, Alison is the library expert and Amy has knowledge about book structure. The extent of their learning from each other is revealed in the teacher's discussion with them.

Samantha: (*After listening to Alison's book*) Hey! It says 'So she went on' — like mine.

Teacher: Why is Alison's book like yours?

Samantha: Well, she looked at my book.

Alison: No, you read it to me.

Samantha: I think she did it so that we can be together in the library. (*The school librarian had promised a special spot in the library for their finished books.*)

Alison: No, Samantha, your book would be in a different place in the library. I would be in the 'T' (*the first letter of her surname*).

Amy: I would be in the Cs.

Samantha: I would be in the Js.

Teacher: Why did you put this writing on the back of the book?

Samantha: Well, Amy told me about her writing, so I decided to do it too.

Amy: A blurb is at the back of the book ... and it tells you about the book.

Much peer learning also occurs when groups contain children who have different opinions. Choosing groups based on difference rather than similarity means that children have to explain and justify more regularly. They learn to see things from another point of view. They learn to devise ways to test their theories. They engage in much higher-order thinking.

Underlying all the care taken in forming groups is the teacher's knowledge of the children. Observation and reflection again!

Clearly, then, there are benefits from grouping children in many different ways: they are challenged, they have opportunities to know each other genuinely, and they learn to adapt to different personalities and associated group dynamics. At the same time, keeping some groups stable for a term, or even a year, allows issues of group interaction to be worked at in more depth. So, for example, children may be in a news group for the year, a reading group for a term, an investigation group for a few weeks and a discussion group for half a lesson.

Time

The current trend for literacy and numeracy blocks is fortuitous for the formation of learning communities. Blocks save time. The more time spent on changing classrooms, teachers, books, groups, and so on, the less time there is for real learning. Pressures of time mean that less attention can be given to assessment, observation and, most importantly, *reflection* on learning and working in groups. When time is pressured, it is dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge but not to the support of learning together. Reflection time is the first thing to be cut. Time for reflection allows teachers and children to form a deeper understanding of their learning, and gives direction to future learning.

The witches' writing

A group of children in their first year of school begin to play a game together at the very beginning of their schooling. They pretend that they are witches. After the teacher notices they are 'reading' spells from books, she challenges them to write their spells down. They do this brilliantly, inventing their own system of writing. In a reflection time at the end of the session, the teacher asks them:

Teacher: Why does witches' writing have ticks and crosses?

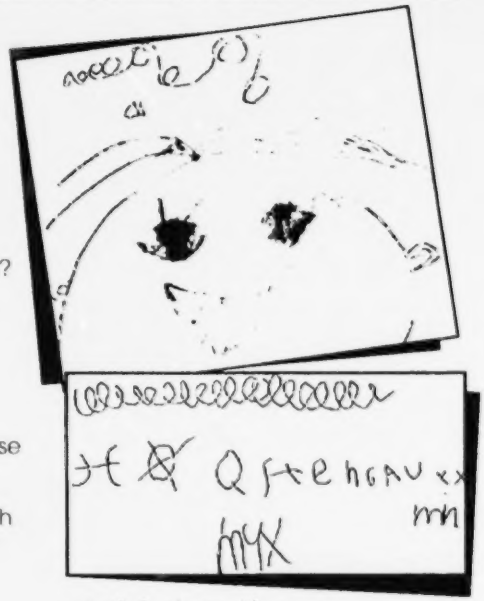
Jessica: Because it makes it very special. It turns them funny.

Donovan: Because it makes them funny.

Sinead: A tick means it's right. (*Jessica agrees.*)

Raimonda: Crosses mean you're wrong ... witches ... because they make them bad.

Sinead: The bad witches turn to stone ... the wicked witch of the west.



A witch, along with student-devised witches' writing.

Asking questions about the witches' writing encouraged children to think about what writing is. In particular, they supported each other in the understanding that writing has meaning, and is systematic. This discussion also reveals that the children are truly working as a group, having reached a high level of agreement about their writing system.

Negotiating learning with children takes time. While it can be done in a class meeting of 15 minutes, this time still needs to be given priority.

Allowing children time to *pursue* a learning experience over many weeks, rather than chopping and changing topics, allows them to reach some depth in their learning and gives time to work through the dynamics of their group. The group has a chance to own some really exciting learning, enhancing their concept of themselves as effective learners.

Quality listening

Teacher modelling of listening is important. But for teachers to listen, they need to talk less. The kinds of questions asked are important, too. Open-ended questions encourage meaningful interaction, enabling students to demonstrate what they know and what they think. It is also important to build or piggy-back onto children's responses with an invitation to continue the conversation.

The *number* of questions asked is also important. If you listen to the conversation of adults or children who are great friends, you will notice that they respond to each other with statements of agreement and encouragement, and only an occasional question. This keeps the flow of communication going.

The following conversation occurred after these children, in their first year of school, had finally — after many tries and much problem-solving — managed to count a chain of 456 links that they made during a guided play session. Ordinarily, the problem of counting so many links would not be expected to be achieved by five- and six-year-olds but, given time, they were able to do it. Minh, Constance and Thomas' use of 'we' shows that they identify the learning as being co-constructed.

Teacher: Do you remember how you counted the chain?

Minh: We counted in hundreds.

Teacher: Why?

Thomas: If we use it (*Pointing and miming counting on by 1*), we would never get there; we would keep losing because we would always forget. You'd need 78 people to help you!

Constance: Counting by 100 you get there faster and quicker.

Real activities, big questions

Solving big problems together helps to draw a community closer. This is as true in the classroom and school community as it is in adult life.

Pursuing investigations that ask big, important questions captures children's imagination and engages them in a way that simple unconnected exercises do not. In the later primary years, children often have the chance to work on big questions — monitoring stream quality, creating class parliaments, participating in web quests and so on.

The same opportunities may not exist for younger children. Yet young children are full of big questions: Why can't sharks live in salt water? How can you change salt water into fresh water? What's infinity plus infinity? Are dragons real? These questions are but a small sample of those which one group of children asked their Year 1/2 teacher in a given week. (For example, the questions about water arose from the class's Science unit on water.) Investigating the answer to any of these questions would make a rich learning task for a group of children. By doing so, the students would not only follow the designated topic but would engage in it at a deeper and more purposeful level.

Like Minh, Constance and Thomas, children want to own the knowledge gained from investigating big questions as a group. The positive feelings developed from the achievements of an investigation develop further the desire to learn together as a community. The children's engagement with their learning is also a natural opportunity to share with the parents and solicit their contributions to the learning community.

Conclusion

Creating an ideal learning environment in the early years of schooling means creating a classroom learning community. Learning communities in the first years of school are possible when teachers believe in the capabilities of children. Because all members of a learning community learn together, the teacher needs to develop a role as an expert facilitator who learns along with the children, and who, through active listening, builds the deep knowledge of each student that will be necessary to guide their development. All aspects of classroom life should reflect this philosophy.

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Lesley Studans is a classroom teacher at St Monica's School, North Parramatta. Teachers at St Monica's have been working together to explore concepts of co-operative learning for many years, along with many other schools in the Parramatta Diocese of western Sydney. (Visit the Kindergarten Forum at http://ceo-web.parra.catholic.edu.au/kindernet/) Four years of working in before-school settings sparked Lesley's quest to develop similar quality learning in the early years of school. As part of this quest, Lesley studied and visited the Municipal Preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. She is supported and extended in her thinking by the REsearch group at Macquarie University.

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